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The Unknown and Unemployed Masses with Disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago

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Around the world, a large percentage of people with disabilities, including physical, visual, intellectual, hearing, and learning disabilities, are either unemployed or underemployed (Markel & Barclay, 2009; World Health Organization 2011). In 2011, the unemployment rate of people with disabilities globally was 56% (WHO, 2011). Baker, Linden, LaForce, Rutledge and Goughnou (2018) expressed concern over the high percentage of persons with disabilities who are unemployed across the globe. This is an alarming statistic which deserves to be addressed (Baker et al., 2018). These high global rates of unemployment of persons with disabilities issue is aggravated by employers' circumspect approach to the employment of persons with disabilities (Colella & Bruyère 2011; Gilbride et al., 2000).

Previous research has explored the employment rates of individuals with disabilities in many regions worldwide in order to grasp the sheer gravity of this global issue (Baker et al., 2018; Saleh & Bruyère, 2018). However, from a review of the literature, it is clear that this issue has yet to be adequately addressed in the Caribbean, including Trinidad and Tobago. More specifically, only one published research article focused on employment of individuals with intellectual disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago (Terrana et al., 2016). This literature gap leads to many unanswered questions regarding the inclusivity of persons with disabilities not only in the employment sector but within society holistically.

In relation to countries with developing economies like Trinidad and Tobago, inclusion of persons with disabilities in the workforce has not been a main priority of scholarly research as determined by the scant research available. It is our belief that Trinidad and Tobago has the prospective opportunity of successfully adopting and implementing inclusive employment strategies nationwide because it has one of the largest economies in the Caribbean (Central Statistical Office, 2011). This would, in turn, provide a model for other nations of similar economies and population size as well as those in the wider Caribbean and Latin American regions to utilize in their employment sectors. This paper brings awareness of the current reality of unemployment of persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago, in spite of international directives to ensure equal opportunities and non-discriminatory employment practices. A review of the relevant international mandates, national legislation, and national and international statistics will therefore be addressed. The most recent census data available in Trinidad and Tobago is 2011, and as such, other statistical references throughout this paper will utilize data from 2011 for the purposes of consistency and drawing an accurate picture that faithfully representing the situation within Trinidad and Tobago. Given the lack of research in the region on this issue, this paper will explore countries with similar economies in order to draw conclusions that can be paralleled to Trinidad and Tobago.

Individuals with Disabilities

Global Perspectives

Individuals with disabilities of all types make up approximately 15% of the world population as of 2011 (Saleh & Bruyère, 2018). According to the United Nations (1948), the global population in 2011 was 7 billion, which means that in 2011, 1.05 billion people worldwide had either physical, visual, intellectual, hearing, or learning disabilities or a combination of any of these disabilities listed. Moreover, this number will increase as people develop disabilities due to age, chronic health diseases and conditions, incidents during employment, and other issues (Harper, 2013; Houtrow, Larson, Olson, Newacheck, & Halfon, 2014; Vos et al., 2015). When viewing the global population, more than a billion people in the world are likely facing and/or likely to face unemployment.

Regional (Caribbean) and National (Trinidad and Tobago) Perspectives

From a regional perspective, in the Caribbean there are approximately 1.3 million persons with disabilities (ECALC, 2018). Trinidad and Tobago is a small twin-island Republic, and as of 2011, there are 1,328,019 persons in the country (Central Statistical Office, 2011). Out of this approximate 1.3 million persons, there are 52,244 persons with disabilities (Central Statistical Office, 2011), representing 3.93% of the national population. Therefore, nearly 4% of the national population have disabilities of some kind, which is high given the overall small population size of the country.

The CSO (2011) data recorded 330,752 children (persons aged 0-17) in the entire population of Trinidad and Tobago out of which 3,302 are children with disabilities. Therefore, children with disabilities represent 1% of the total child population in Trinidad and Tobago, which is again high given the population size of the country. Further, there are 997,267 adults (persons 18 years and older) in Trinidad and Tobago, which is 75.1% of population. As a result, there are 48,942 adults with disabilities, which is 4.9% of the adult population of the country. This means that almost 5% of the adult population are persons with disabilities who are of the age of employment, and are part of the available workforce of the country facing unemployment. For a small twin island Republic, 5% is a blaring statistic, but is wholly in line with international trends. It is important then to note the international statistics specifically regarding the employment of persons with disabilities to put the statistics from Trinidad and Tobago into perspective.

Data Regarding Employment of Persons with Disabilities

The employment rate of people with disabilities globally in 2011 was 44%, compared to 75% for people without disabilities (WHO, 2011). From this, there is an obvious disparity between the numbers, depicting that persons without disabilities have a higher likelihood of accessing employment opportunities. The exclusion of persons with disabilities from the workforce results in trillions of dollars in annual loss in gross domestic product (GDP) (Metts, 2000; Ozawa & Yeo, 2006.) As it pertains to Trinidad and Tobago, in 2011 the national unemployment rate was 5.8% (Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago, 2011). However, there is currently no data available on the number of persons with disabilities who are employed in Trinidad and Tobago. It seems as though either this data is not readily available or accessible to the public or that Trinidad and Tobago did not collect this data. Considering this, the concern lies within the question of whether Trinidad and Tobago does not have enough resources to collect this data or whether this country does not prioritize the em-

ployment of persons with disabilities. This is a major research gap that should be addressed since, as noted above, trillions of dollars are at stake and it appears that many businesses have yet to realize the numerous benefits to hiring persons with disabilities.

The Benefits of Employing Persons with Disabilities

Although individuals with disabilities are underemployed and unemployed around the world, the reality exists that there are several advantages to hiring this specific demographic. These benefits include firstly the creation of a diverse workforce and secondly a boost for workplace morale and the reputation of the organization, both of which are deemed indirect productivity boosters (ILO, 2010). In fact, many multinational corporations view “neurodiversity as a competitive advantage” for recruiting talented individuals (Austin & Pisano, 2017, p. 96). Often employers are unaware of the fact that they have constricted the talent within the organization and relinquished higher levels of productivity by choosing not to hire persons with disabilities (Kaye, Jans, & Jones, 2011). For example, research has stipulated that persons with disabilities are reliable and productive employees (Saleh & Bruyère, 2018).

In the world of business however, it seems that all that matters is the bottom line: profitability. Many employers may feel that employment of persons with disabilities is not profitable. However, recent research highlighted the fact that the employment of persons with disabilities included improvements in profitability (Lindsay, Cagliostro, Albarico, Mortaji, & Karon, 2018). Profitability is also greatly expanded through the hiring of persons with disabilities as research indicated an increased competitive advantage for businesses, the creation of inclusive work culture, and greater workplace awareness (Lindsay et. al., 2018). These are all accepted improvements through the hiring of people with disabilities.

The benefits are not solely for the organization which employs such individuals. Research showed that the employment for persons with disabilities leads to an improved quality of life, greater self-confidence, larger community and social networks for the individual, and the obvious source of income (Lindsay et. al., 2018). The nation of Trinidad and Tobago therefore stands to significantly gain by promoting the employment of persons with disabilities. However, it is not solely about money and benefits, since it is the right of persons with disabilities to access employment, and this right is enshrined in international documents.

Rights of Persons with Disabilities

International Treaty Mandates

Trinidad and Tobago is party to the United Nations (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). These international treaties mandated the signatory countries to meet a minimum standard regarding the rights of persons with disabilities. The UDHR (United Nations, 1948) professed the equality of all persons without distinction and, for full clarity, specifically states that this includes persons with disabilities. With regard to employment, the UDHR (United Nations, 1948) stated that all persons have the right to work, to choose their employment, to fair and safe working conditions and to the protection against unemployment. In light of this, Trinidad and Tobago has an obligation to uphold the right of persons with disabilities to work and have access to employment.

Furthermore, according to the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006), persons with disabilities are entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. The UNCRPD further places an onus on all signatories to the Convention (including Trinidad and Tobago) to uphold the rights for people with disabilities without discrimination. As it pertains to employment, the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006) stated that it is a country's priority to ensure habilitation and rehabilitation services and programs are in place in the employment sector for persons with disabilities. The UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006) enshrines the right to employment of persons with disabilities on an equal basis with that of people without disabilities. This right to work prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability and includes the right to fair and beneficial working conditions including equality of opportunities and remuneration. Trinidad and Tobago is expected to fulfill these expectations as a signatory to this treaty.

The right to work and the access to education are inextricably linked. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) highlighted the importance of assisting young people with disabilities as they transition into adult life. Countries should ensure that these individuals are equipped with the necessary education and training to meet the demands of being an adult, which includes employment. The Salamanca Statement also highlighted the significant role of the media in that it should be used to foster a more positive mindset for employers hiring people with disabilities. In acknowledgement of the many treaty obligations that Trinidad and Tobago must adhere to, there is a need to align these obligations with national legislation and policies. As such, the national perspectives will be explored.

National Mandates

The Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago, which enshrines the fundamental rights of the citizens of the country, ensures the freedom from discrimination on the basis of race, origin, color, religion, and sex. There is no specific mention of disabilities within the provision granting the freedom from discrimination in the Constitution. In fact, according to the government of Trinidad and Tobago, the sole piece of legislation addressing persons with disabilities specifically in Trinidad and Tobago is the Equal Opportunities Act (EOA) of 2000 (National Policy on Persons with Disabilities, 2018).

The EOA sought to grant, among other things, the freedom from discrimination in employment to all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. It provides the freedom from discrimination to persons of any "status," including the status of persons with disabilities. However, section 14 of the EOA places a fetter on the rights of persons with disabilities. Section 14 states that the right to freedom from discrimination in employment does not apply to the employment of a person with a disability in certain circumstances: if because of the disability the person is unable to fulfill the job requirements, it causes unjustifiable hardship to the employer to employ such a person, or it puts the prospective employee or other employees at risk. This exception to a fundamental freedom, however, does not seem to be in line with the international mandates Trinidad and Tobago has agreed to. It is understandable why such a provision exists in national law in order to ensure the health and safety of all persons employed; however, the international standards require the country to be free from discriminatory practices regarding the employment of persons with disabilities. A similar exception to the right of persons with disabilities to access educational establishments is found in section 18A of the EOA, which is crucial because the access to education is directly linked to employment.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago released its Revised National Policy on Persons with Disabilities in 2018. In this policy, the Government recognized that this legislation can be considered discriminatory to persons with disabilities and cannot be supported in light of the Interna-

tional Treaties to which the country is party (National Policy on Persons with Disabilities, 2018). As such, this includes an intent to revamp the legislation. This Revised Policy (2018) has yet to be fully implemented. It is also worth recalling that there is a paucity of research on persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago, which may provide a proper framework to successfully implement and outwork national policies and strategies.

Call for Research

In the attempts to analyze and understand the literature available on the employment of persons with disabilities, we conducted a systematic search using the following databases in EBSCO-Host: Academic Search Alumni Edition, Academic Search Complete, Education Source, Educational Administration Abstracts, ERIC, Fuente Académica Premier, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO. Our search phrases included the following: line 1: disabilities or disability or disabled or impairment or impaired or special needs; line 2: employment or job or work or career or unemployment; and line 3: trinidad and Tobago or Caribbean. From this search, 24 articles were found. However, of those articles, no articles fit the criteria and relevancy for this topic of employment of persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago. In addition to this, we conducted a Google Scholar using the similar search terms. Upon extensive searching, only two articles were found to be aligned to our discussion.

The limited available literature about persons with disabilities in the Caribbean region reveals that there is a reality of marginalization of persons with disabilities from the individual and governmental level. Gayle and Palmer (2005) conducted a study in Jamaica entitled “Activism of Persons with Disabilities In Jamaica,” where the authors concluded that 73% of persons with disabilities are unemployed. This is a statistic worth noting within the Caribbean region, which is amplified by that fact that people with disabilities remain a low priority in terms of social policy in Jamaica (Gayle & Palmer 2005); this may explain the little research found on that issue for Jamaica. Those persons with disabilities who are employed are much likely to be underpaid and given low-skilled and low status jobs (Gayle & Palmer 2005). There is also a general lack of enforcement of the national policy initiatives on behalf of the Government. Gayle and Palmer (2005) rightfully stated that the marginalization of persons with disabilities “from the mainstream of socio-economic and political life if unchecked, robs society of the potential contribution...to its productivity,” (p. 136). This goes hand in hand with the aforementioned statistic, which dictates that trillions of dollars in possible income is lost due to the unemployment of people with disabilities.

As it pertains to Trinidad and Tobago, Terrana et al., (2016) conducted a study on vocational training and rehabilitation of people with intellectual disabilities. The study concluded that the vocational services offered in Trinidad and Tobago face various challenges inclusive of social stigma and a lack of resources to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. Considering this finding, with limited vocational training available for persons with disabilities, the reality of these individuals being equipped with the appropriate and relevant skills needed for employment is farfetched. It is necessary for individuals with disabilities to be able to access training. Since this is not the case in Trinidad and Tobago, unemployment rates for persons with disabilities are directly impacted and most probably increasing.

Based on our literature search, these are the only two published studies available within the region on this issue. As such, in order to gain insight, research from other developing economies will be explored to ascertain whether valuable information can be gleaned to assist in providing a framework of addressing the issue of unemployment of persons with disabilities.

Employment Rates and Disability in Developing Countries

According to Mizunoya and Mitra (2012), developing countries (like Trinidad and Tobago) have a higher prevalence of persons with disabilities and persons with disabilities have lower employment rates. To emphasize the severity of this issue, the study conducted spanned 15 countries and the authors concluded that in 13 of the 15 countries, “the employment rate of persons with disabilities is consistently lower than that of persons without disabilities.” (Mizunoya & Mitra, 2012, p. 32). In nine of the countries studied there was also a significant gap in employment of persons with disabilities, meaning that persons with disabilities are significantly less employed. Furthermore, a large portion of the employed people with disabilities are self-employed. Notably, the study indicated that the gap in employment of persons with disabilities is more widespread in middle income countries, like Trinidad and Tobago (the World Bank defines middle income countries as those having a per capita gross national income of U.S.\$1,026 to \$12,475 (World Bank, 2011)). Seven of the nine countries with the major gap in employment of persons with disabilities are middle income countries.

According to the WTO (2012), Trinidad and Tobago is a high income developing country, however, in the recent years, Trinidad and Tobago has undergone a prolonged economic recession. As such, the World Bank (2018) indicates that the country is an upper-middle income nation. If Trinidad and Tobago has been deemed a middle income country and its statistics are consistent with the study conducted by Mizunoya and Mitra (2012), there should exist a major gap in the employment of persons with disabilities in the nation. This cannot be confirmed without detailed research into the issue but is a fair and reasonable determination of the unknown statistic, given the international trends.

Future Research

Further research is desirable pertaining to the employment rates of persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago. If Trinidad and Tobago is in line with global statistics, it is highly likely that there is a significant gap in the number of persons with disabilities who are gainfully employed and further, who are properly remunerated in desirable jobs with upward mobility. Given the national legislation (EOA), which according to the national policy (National Policy on Persons with Disabilities, 2018) can be viewed as “discriminatory” regarding employment, and the lack of tangible implementation of international treaty obligations, the existence of alarming statistics regarding unemployment of persons with disabilities is exceedingly probable. This, coupled with the social stigma against persons with disabilities and the lack of resources as revealed in the limited literature on this issue, incites the need for research in this field which will likely shed light on very dire circumstances. Research will also reveal the amount of untapped potential that has gone unnoticed in Trinidad and Tobago. The nation has the potential to stand as an example to the Caribbean and Latin American region of the benefits to the employment of people with disabilities.

Conclusion

Although Trinidad and Tobago may be a leading Caribbean nation, the international treaties regarding the rights of persons with disabilities have yet to be fully implemented and effected. The global trends reflect that there is an international crisis with regards to the employment of people with disabilities, and Trinidad and Tobago will be no exception to this phenomenon. There are implication statistics which suggest that there may be a major gap in the employment of persons with

disabilities when compared to persons without disabilities. Therefore, data needs to be gathered and the employment rates of persons with disabilities need to be addressed.

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Chelseia Charran, M.A., is a doctoral candidate at The University of Texas at Austin studying Equity and Diversity in Special Education. She is from the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Her current research interests are related to inclusive education, and international and comparative special education, primarily in the Caribbean. In 2016, she completed her Master of Arts degree in Early Childhood Special Education at The University of Texas at Austin. Prior to her graduate studies, Chelseia graduated from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 2015 with two Bachelor degrees: Bachelor of Science in Special Education and Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. Chelseia is passionate about making lasting change to the educational system in Trinidad and Tobago and influencing national education policies based on international contemporary practices. Upon completion of her doctorate projected 2019, Chelseia desires to join the collaborative efforts of the community of people who aspire to shape the future of her nation.

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